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County Council to talk hot-button zoning issues

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WALHALLA — The controversial debate over proposed changes to Oconee County's year-old zoning law goes from the frying pan into the fire.

On Tuesday, the Oconee County Council is scheduled to look at and discuss a series of hot zoning issues proposed by the Planning Commission during its May 3 meeting.

One of the recommendations planners passed on to council would allow the county to charge a $5 per parcel application fee for rezoning out of the Control Free District by using the small area rezoning method.

Commissioner Bill Evatt made the motion for the $5 fee after Planning Director Art Holbrooks calculated that the cost to the county of going through a rezoning petition process breaks down to a total of $7.84 per

SEE ZONING, PAGE A5

FROM PAGE A1

parcel. The costs add up when you consider that a single petition could include hundreds of parcels.

Since implementing the zoning law on May 1, 2009, Holbrooks said that his department has spent more than $4,000 processing petitions.

Commission Chairman Tommy Abbott took a jab at those opposed to the imposition of a fee.

"If someone in a district wants to be rezoned but doesn't want to pay $5, then they don't want it pretty bad," he said.

Other controversial changes proposed to council include:

- Having the Planning Commission approve the boundaries of any citizen-initiated request so that overlapping of requests is avoided;
- Requiring petition sponsors to obtain the signatures of 65 percent of parcel owners representing 65 percent of the area's land mass; and
- Prioritizing the processing of submitting requests by pushing up those petitions with overwhelming support and which lack known conflicts.

One of the groups supporting zoning efforts in the county — Advocates for Quality Development — is opposed to most of the changes proposed by the Commission. AQD is keeping its members abreast of the issues and encouraging them to let their voices be heard at Tuesday's council meeting.

AQD President Jim Codner said the group does support the Planning Department's recommendation to create two new zoning classifications — Agricultural Residential District and Public and Recreational Lands District — to the original options.

Council will take up an ordinance in first reading that would incorporate the two new districts into the zoning law.

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